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RIZPAH

By ANNIE E. HOLDSWORTH.

Author of "The Years That the Locusts Eaten," "Joanna Trull, Spinster," etc.
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The way of Fawcett's death was one of those problems which a hurrying civilization has no time to solve. The dark night, the steps slippery with ice, Fawcett's impetuosity, made a setting obvious enough for the verdict of accidental death. Life concerned itself with the latest murder: earth received Fawcett, and men forgot him.

But his death had built a stronger barrier between his wife and Mark than the one his life had raised. Rizpah could not forget that Fawcett had forbidden her friendship with Mark. She feared disloyalty when, in these first days of widowhood, her heart turned instinctively to her old friend. She longed for his presence, and the longing kept her from seeking it. He knew of Fawcett's death, and he would come to her.

But Mark was busy in his studio, putting a screen of work between himself and the thought of Rizpah. The oak chest, with its carving of Rizpah keeping the vultures from her dead, was hidden in the window seat. He would have nothing to remind him of the love Fawcett's death had stolen from him. She was free now; yet he worked early and late striving to forget her. But he could not forget her as little as Fawcett's face, a horror intolerable.

He could not go to comfort Rizpah; the thing was too ironical. He heard how hardly the three months' wife took the blow, how she fretted and drooped; but if he had known she was grieving for his absence, and not for Fawcett, he would still have remained away.

He was very busy. His great picture was almost finished, and it was another irony that its subject lashed his memory into the remembrance he was striving to forget. "I Am the Resurrection and the Life," the title was written at the foot of the canvas. Above it the white splendor of the angel shone out, a marvelous presentment of life. It was a great picture, and Mark knew it. It needed only the finishing touches before he could send it out to make his name and fame.

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over him. Would he never get away from Fawcett again?

During the next days a good many artists dropped in to see Mark. A queer story, was running about town that he had deliberately destroyed the best piece of work he had ever done.

He met his friends' inquiries in a way that only confirmed their suspicions, and his unaccountable fury added impetus to the report. At last it made its way to the Kenelmist art circles, and Rizpah heard that Mark was losing his reason, and she loved him still. She had a right to go to him when he needed care and love. Why should conventional divide them when destiny had removed the barrier between them? Fawcett had been dead a year, and she had played out the face of mourning. She had not loved him. She would never have married him but for that story he had told her of Mark's desertion. And now Mark needed her, and she would not allow her husband to separate them any longer.

She trembled as she climbed the steps of the studio. The thought of the old days, when she had run up swiftly to meet her lover, shook her limbs. The hours she had sat to him for the design he had carved on the chest lay on her like leaden weights, holding her back. But their weight swung her forward, too. If Rizpah could guard her head from the culture the modern Rizpah could guard the living. No one answered her knocking at the studio door, and after a few minutes she turned the handle and went in.

As she crossed the room Mark lifted his eyes and stared blankly. He made no movement of welcome, and the change in him, his haggard face and strange manner, were knives in her heart. Weakness and irresolution crouched in the figure she remembered with its splendid certainty of strength. She pressed her hands together, and her face whitened. It was true, then, he was losing his reason!

"Oh, Mark—my dear love!" At her cry he sprang up and recognition leaped to his eyes. "Rizpah! Is it you? You have come!" he cried wonderingly.

"Yes," she answered, with a little sob; "I want you, Mark!"

"She would have taken his hand, but he drew away from her."

"Don't touch me!" he said, sternly. "You ought not to have come. You don't know what has happened."

She smiled, calling all her courage to her help. "Yes, I know what has happened. You must not send me away, Mark."

"She looked at him, and did not falter as she added: 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.'"

"I have come because I love you."

"You don't know what you are saying!" he said, harshly. "I am not the Mark you loved. I am a—"

"I know—I know," she interrupted. "You don't know what you are saying!"

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had lifted swept around him again, a wintry fog obscuring his vision. He could not see his old love, and he tried to find her again in new scenes.

They went from place to place, whipped on by the lash of his restlessness. Fawcett, Munie offered no delight that could hold him, and Rizpah, following breathless, saw the evil spirit again in possession.

She hid her trouble that Mark might be pleased; but her cheerfulness was like the barking of the dogs that hounded him on. If she had been subdued and saddened she would have suited his mood, and might have comforted him by sharing the burden he carried. He said to himself bitterly it was nothing to her that his days were darkened; she found her happiness still. He had thought her deep-natured; but now he told himself only a shallow nature could bury memory under the flowers of life. And all the time the woman was hiding her tragedy under the guise of comedy.

He could not forget Fawcett's wonder that Fawcett's wife had so soon forgotten. Her presence was a reminder from which he could not escape. Soon he began to dread the sight of her.

Rizpah's heart sank as she noticed his furtive, abashed looks. He could not meet her glance, and his avoidance gave a shifty uncertainty to his eyes, which her fears read all too clearly. She put her terror aside, that she might lure him from the threatening danger; but her arts and beguilements only aggravated his restlessness.

They spent the winter in flight from city to city, Mark pursued by memory and growing distrust of Rizpah, she flying from the terror that her memory had gained upon her. Since their marriage day he had not touched a brush, and Rizpah had been glad to take him away from his work. But now she saw that idleness was not good for him. The ceaseless moving kept life in a ferment; there was no rest for mind or body.

"Let us go home," she coaxed. "I long to see London again. I am tired of being a bit of a passage."

She leaned her arm on his knee, and her eyes pleaded with her voice. But Mark would not see the tender face lifted to his. Her words angered him. Here was he, striving to get away from the scene of his crime, and the woman he had taken to be with him tempted him back into its shadow. She had no heart. She pined for the life whose threshold was stained by her husband's blood. She remembered that she had been glad to know that Fawcett was dead. Her touch tainted him with her infamy. He shook off her arm, and jerked himself up from his chair. The studio at home offered a refuge from Rizpah's disturbing presence. The ghosts that met him there would be less horrible than the smiles of the woman who loved her husband's murderer.

"Yes, let us go home," he said eagerly. "I have idled too long. It is time I began my work."

Her eyes sparkled at the quick accents, the gesture of decision. He only needed the word to rouse him, she told herself. He had missed his interest and grown morbid. Men were not like women; love did not satisfy them. Hope soared in her heart. Work would give him the peace he had been glad to know that Fawcett was dead. Her touch tainted him with her infamy. He shook off her arm, and jerked himself up from his chair. The studio at home offered a refuge from Rizpah's disturbing presence. The ghosts that met him there would be less horrible than the smiles of the woman who loved her husband's murderer.

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the dead. In the window they were piled like a cairn on the oak chest. He picked up one after another, examining them. He was so possessed by the dread that filled his brain that when it met him from the outside he could not recognize it.

"Pooh! It is delusion. The thing can't exist, he reassured himself. 'It is the madness of overwork. I see shapes that are only imaginary. This work is good, excellent! I might ask Stacey to look in. He would be able to tell me. But, no! He had that confounded notion, too. He said it ruined the other.'

One after the other he had lifted the canvases, and now the chest stood bare. The carving on it, after the vivid realism of the paintings, was like a calm after the frenzy. It caught his eye and led him back into days before Fawcett had crossed his life—those rare days when Rizpah had sat to him as a model. The memory of the girl in whose face he had seen the anguish of the first Rizpah came again to him. It was that noble sadness that had suggested the scheme he had carved on the chest. Her strong patience had inspired him. He had been so sure of her, so sure that she would never forget him, that he forgot the woman whose obtrusive cheerfulness had estranged him.

"She was an excellent critic in those days; I could always trust her judgment," he said. "I might ask her to come in. She would know if it was all imagination."

The idea seized him. "Yes, she would know. I shall be able to tell by her face when she sees them. It will be a certain test. In a fever of haste he began arranging the canvases around the room, till the four walls were covered, and easel and curtain and frame stood laden.

He stepped into the middle of the room and turned slowly around. As he looked the flush of excitement passed and left his face stricken. He was in a circle, hemmed in by the multiplied horror of his imagination. The thing was around him—everywhere, everywhere! He could not escape it. It leaped out from innerable eyes on the walls. It sneaked at him from the easels, it mocked at him from the frames, it lurked in the folds of the curtains. There was no escape from it. His glance was a moth shriveling in fire, flashing itself into the flame that burnt and did not consume it.

Mark's request that she should come to the studio at 3 o'clock struck a gleam of surprise across the darkness on Rizpah's face. It was almost the first word he had spoken to her for days. This invitation to the studio meant that he had only excluded her while he worked. Now that his picture was finished he would take her back into his life. The blood swung in her veins. The winter was over and gone. The time for the singing of the birds had come.

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